

## INTERACTION AND COLLABORATION IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*Apart from a minor group of people whose individual learning needs are recognized for special resourcing, many disadvantaged learners experience difficulties in literacy. Their parents and care takers, potentially, an important source of additional support in encouraging literacy acquisition. In addition, embedded within particular approaches and strategies for developing literacy are a variety of underlying assumptions about the process of literacy acquisition. This paper illustrates these issues with reference to a particular programme currently used in Literacy Centres in a Land Development Scheme. It will go on to outline the training services given to a group of untrained practitioners leading these centres. This is done in order that they may negotiate effective literacy programmes which can harness all available resources to address difficulties in literacy development. The training focusses on ways to inculcate interaction and collaboration among trainees.*

### INTRODUCTION

The term early literacy conjures up images of parents or carers and children snuggling up with a good book - surpassing the benefits of reform for "tackling under-education and all the related social and economic problems" (Darling, 1992:1). It's been widely acknowledged that the long term benefits of early literacy will include reduction in school failure, better use of community resources, higher income and the reduction in need for social services. Early literacy is one of the few educational reform initiatives that is gaining rather than losing momentum as we embark on efforts towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The fact that so many advocates use the same terminology - the enticing discourse of empowering parents, respecting cultural diversity and building on family strengths, makes the challenge even greater for practitioners.

This challenge is framed in terms of inadequate literacy support; the assumption is that there's a given body of knowledge about what constitutes "good" literacy and instructional support practices which experts have identified and which needs to be transmitted to literacy carers. Most literacy programs are premised on the notion that it is necessary to find ways of extending school reading experiences after school (Morrow, 1995; Baker,

Sonnenschein and Serpell, 1994). These scholars argue

that intervention models completely overlook the many studies which show that culturally diverse families have already gone to great extent to support their children, but are constrained by systemic factors arguing that structural and institutional problems impede children's literacy development. There is a body of research (Valdes, 1996, Street, 1995) that suggest that the nurturing of existing cultural and linguistic resources is a critical basis, not only for enhancing cultural identity, but for supporting academic achievement. It has been noted that whatever their literacy proficiency, learners bring with them culture-specific literacy practices and ways of knowing. Regardless of their educational background, households of poor and language minority families are rich with knowledge which may often go unrecognized and untapped by educators. As such, it makes good sense that the starting point for teaching must be a stance of inquiry: the first task of educators is to listen to students, to find out about their lives and cultural contexts, and to make room for their literacy practices in teaching.

### The Freirean Approach

This model aptly applies a Freirean approach which argues that the acquisition of literacy in itself does not lead to empowerment or solve economic problems but that it must be linked to a critical understanding of the

social context and move toward action to challenge oppressive conditions. This perspective starts with what's important to parents, families and communities, so that literacy can be used to address the struggles of their everyday live; this means 'beginning with questions, not with solutions'. The questions might include:

What are the compelling issues in the lives of the community? What are already being done and what needs to be done with literacy? Who initiates such programs?

An important feature of the Freirean perspective is the goal of action for social change. Once participants have an increased understanding of the social nature of problems they are confronting, and they may work together to change the conditions which impede literacy acquisition. Actions can take many forms, including a particular kind of literacy program. One of the most common forms of action is that participants become engaged in advocacy related to their children's schooling.

In the preface to 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' Shaul (1972) observed that Freire's thought represents the response of a creative mind and sensitive conscience to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed around him. Concerned with social transformation and the development of liberatory education, he focused on educational practices, the empowerment of teachers, teachers as agents of empowering students and social class empowerment. Although Freire's work is seen as highly political, it has become the foundation for the development of a more liberating pedagogy. Though Freire's ideas are grounded in the poverty and oppression of his earlier years, the utility of his approach transcends national, class and ethnic boundaries. According to Freire, the transforming power of words enables people to live fuller, more humane lives. Caulfield (1991) explains that "Words," for Freire, "have meaning only in relation to their effect on human beings and the world in which we live."

## Literacy Development

The Malaysian Federal Land Development Authority

(FELDA) and its landholdings found the need to take charge of its educational and literacy development as there exists a gap in education in the country where:

- the majority of resources were targeted towards the mainstream or general population;
- there were no peer-led or professional train-the-trainer initiatives;
- there were few examples of socio-economically and culturally relevant materials;
- there are varying degrees of understanding of, and definitions for literacy development among providers.

Concerned with growing numbers of underachieving school going children in the FELDA settlement, a support program for early literacy development was initiated. About 300 family literacy centres were set up throughout the FELDA schemes with an average of 15 children aged 2 to 4 years per centre. The main objective of the family literacy centre was to focus on learning activities that would encourage reading and inculcate the love for books among children. The program incorporates culturally familiar pedagogical practices; the centres run similar to preschool concept, 3 hours a day beginning in the morning, and the classes opened with a prayer. The program is free, parents are encouraged to send their children to the centres but not made compulsory. The approach also emphasizes promoting first language literacy along with second language literacy as a vehicle for cultural maintenance. Another feature of the approach is that it promotes hiring teachers who come from the same cultural backgrounds as the learners because they are likely to be familiar with the learners' cultures, languages and literacy practices. In fact teachers, or popularly known as *Literacy Leaders*, in these literacy centres are all wives of FELDA settlers who voluntarily accepted the job with minimal pocket allowance. The literacy leaders who have some form of schooling were provided with training from time to time by training providers selected by FELDA.

## The Training Program

The training program described here is based on the

Freirean philosophy of education and it aimed to provide the community with a pool of locally trained literacy leaders which could work more effectively to improve their lot. The training programs were conducted in batches of 40 trainees based on either regions or states, with each training session lasting for three days. The program consists of various modules emphasising collaboration and interaction. Group projects promote creativity and improve teaching skills. In the program, specific attention is given to the educational training materials modified to appropriately reflect collaborative practices; for example, tasks on learning about animals will focus on the discussion of animals familiar to them such as cow, cat, monkey, snake, lizard and so on. The trainees are encouraged to relate their own experiences during the discussion sessions. Similarly cultural activities that were incorporated in the training include dances, songs and creative movements that have been modified to suit the local context.

This interactive learning environment motivates trainees to experience deep learning. The features of this interactive and collaborative learning approach include:

- Small group discussions: Led by representatives chosen by the group. This peer learning approach encourages them to be actively involved in discussions without the pressure of performing in front of instructors.
- Project-based activities: Tasks are given require trainees to solve common problems based on given criteria. This results in cooperative problem solving initiatives.
- Peer-tutoring: Although orchestrating productive peer learning is a complex undertaking, peer tutoring in this context proves to be an effective alternative.
- Inter-group appraisal: The move away from traditional assessment approach, encourages them to critically evaluate peers' performance leading to shared cognitive responsibility.

This instructional approach raises awareness of the interactive and collaborative learning environment that these literacy leaders can use in the literacy centres. It

provides opportunities for the application of collaborative and interactive learning from youth, as the children attending the centres are aged two to five years. This is highly appropriate considering their rural and disadvantaged backgrounds.

On the part of the trainees, the approach leads them to:

## *i) Question underlying assumptions of practices*

Teachers working in challenging educational contexts face conditions that are increasingly complex. The evolution of multiculturalism, hybrid student identities, youth cultures, have made it necessary for teachers to be increasingly conscious of their educational practices, and more importantly, of the beliefs that underlie those practices. Discussions in education now focus on the multiple differences that characterize specific contexts and people. They challenge teachers to recognize that taken-for-granted educational practices stem from assumptions of homogeneity that are often incompatible with the diversity of contemporary classroom contexts (Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997). Ministry imperatives, standards and state-wide tests play a prominent role in the discourses in which teachers engage. With their emphasis on conformity to standards, these externally produced documents embody dominant discourses that encourage the perpetuation of unquestioned adherence to conventional practice and fail to address issues of marginalization for those outside the mainstream.

In this program teachers' awareness and recognition of the need to look beyond their 'taken-for-granted', comfortable practices and perspectives on teaching for literacy development are emphasized as, from a socio-cultural perspective, literacy instruction and assessment are fundamentally social and political (Muspratt et al 1997). Also the values and beliefs that are highlighted through teachers' assessment practices and materials selection are embedded within pedagogical practices that seem natural and "tried and true," allowing social hierarchies to be reinforced and maintained. Ellsworth (1997) challenges teachers to examine the 'gaps' that are opened up between the conscious and unconscious



responses that students and teachers making teaching and learning contexts.

The teachers were made aware that children closely identify with the language and literacy practices of their peer, home, and community groups (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Bloome, Katz, Solsken, Willett, & Wilson-Keenan, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Street, 1995). Indeed, they are not consciously aware that they are doing so, as they are apprenticed into the social practices through observation, guided practice, and independent practice (Rogoff, 1995). Failure to recognize the interests, intentions, and commitments children bring with them into the classroom is problematic for all children because it fosters a pedagogy of monolingualistic, monocultural interests that does not recognize the strategies and dispositions in which they are the most proficient (Luke, 1995; Valdes, 1996; Zentella, 1997).

#### *ii) recognize socio-cultural differences*

Predominant among the teachers participating in the program was a perception that commonly-accepted and recognized literacy teaching provided them with unquestionably reliable and valid practices for their classrooms.

The training emphasised that practices underpinned by assumptions about common experiences across student and teaching populations do not serve all students equally well. Universals do not exist in classrooms. Teachers were encouraged to articulate their beliefs about teaching and learning and to ask questions about whose interests are served through these practices. Gee (1997) argues that responsible pedagogy requires a "juxtaposition of differences in such a way that commonness can emerge (variable and changing patterns, associations, or generalizations) without obliterating the differences as lived and situated realities, viewing each child as a network of associations formed by his or her socio-cultural experiences.

#### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the issues discussed here, a case can be made that for early literacy development to be

successful, and, teacher training should include exposure to a number of approaches that meet the needs of the learning environment, raising awareness with regards to assumptions about learning as well as teaching. It can be summed that the pedagogy advocated is the "pedagogy of caring".

The support offered by initiative in encouraging the trainees to examine elements of good early literacy instruction - the readily recognized 'taken-for-granted views' that have become standards for quality instruction together with the cultural resources that they and their students bring to the learning centres.

The authors' experiences in training FELDA literacy leaders show that they are better able to question 'taken-for-granted beliefs' when they are part of a learning community. These trainees were encouraged to move into spaces in their teaching that may not feel familiar and natural to them at first. Through taking the risk of getting involved in interactive and collaborative learning, they can now give their children a greater chance of success in literacy development.

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